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## Bethlehem Counterpoint

The Aardvark Jazz Orchestra

Christmas concerts have been an Aardvark Jazz Orchestra tradition for thirty years, and *Bethlehem Counterpoint* is the second album of music gleaned from those performances. AJO's hallmark is the unexpected, and the ensemble frames uncommon settings of every song and carol from "Bring a Torch Jeanette, Isabella" to music director [Mark] Harvey's closing "Benedictus."

The centerpiece is Harvey's seven-section "Counterpoint," a thirty-seven-minute cantata written for the AJO's twenty-fifth annual Christmas concert in 1997 and inspired by Rosie's Place, the first shelter for homeless women in Boston and in America, and its founder, Kip Tiernan. The first four movements, "Begats," "Celestial Light," "Who Is the Prophet" and "The Prophet," feature guest vocalist Sheila Jordan, the last with AJO vocalist Donna Hewitt-Didham, with whom Jordan also sings on the sixth movement, "Sweet Child." Jordan, Hewitt-Didham and the Rev. Rick Chrisman, then associate minister of Old South Church, provide narration on "Who Is the Prophet," while Jordan and bassist Ken Filiano are the lone performers on the carol medley, "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" and "We Three Kings of Orient Are." "Prophet" is the "Jazziest" section of the cantata with exuberant scatting by Jordan and heated solos by tenor Phil Scarff and guitarist Richard Nelson.

Completing the program are the polyrhythmic, Renaissance-style "Bring a Torch" (solos by soprano Daniel Ian Smith and drummer Harry Wellott) and Hans Gruber's "Silent Night," given a blues-gospel treatment with down-home vocal by baritone Jerry Edwards. The spirited "Benedictus," an Afro-Jazz showpiece whose playing time is nearly nineteen minutes, is an audience favorite that has been performed at almost every AJO Christmas concert since the tenth one. Dynamic rhythms predominate, and there is solo space for several members of the ensemble. The orchestra itself is unequivocally cutting-edge, and its adventurous mode of expression may not be music to everyone's ears.

This is by and large recognizably jazz, but a form that is tempered by a radical point of view. The more conservative listener may wish to keep that in mind.

~ [Jack Bowers](#)

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**Track Listing:** Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella; Silent Night; God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen / We Three Kings / Bethlehem Counterpoint; Begats; Celestial Light; Who Is the Prophet; The Prophet; Struggle & Hope; Sweet Child; Peace; Benedictus (76:53).

**Personnel:** Mark Harvey, conductor, music director; Arni Cheatham, Peter Bloom, Phil Scarff, Daniel Ian Smith, Mark Messier, Dan Zupan, Brad Jones, Dan Bosshardt, reeds; K.C. Dunbar, Jeanne Snodgrass, Taylor Ho Bynum, Greg Kelley, Mike Peipman, trumpet; Bob Pilkington, Jay Keyser, trombone; Jeff Marsanskis, Bill Lowe, trombone, tuba; Richard Nelson, guitar; Jesse Williams, Ken Filiano, Jane Wang, bass; Jerry Edwards, electric bass, vocals; Harry Wellott, drums; Craig Ellis, percussion; Donna Hewitt-Didham (4, 6, 9), vocals; Sheila Jordan (3-6, 9), guest vocalist.